

METHOD TO SUPPLY ELECTRIC CURRENT TO A TUBE FURNACE

In furnace operations, high demands are often placed on the insulation of the heated volume. High demands are also placed on the requirement of uniform temperature distribution within the furnace in respect of different applications. In other words, the greatest acceptable temperature difference throughout the heated volume is often very low. In other applications, it is desired to check and control temperature distribution to a very high degree of accuracy in accordance with a predefined distribution.

Examples of such applications are furnaces for single crystal growth, diffusion furnaces and tube-like furnaces where electric current through the tube wall generates the thermal energy that heats the enclosed volume of the furnace. This heating of the furnace volume requires a high amperage input, which means that the devices through which electric current is taken into and out of the furnace must have a large cross-sectional surface area. The furnace may be a continuous conveyor furnace having open ends, or a furnace that fully encloses the furnace volume.

Tube-like furnace may consist of a tube to which current is supplied. The tube may include an internal ceramic lining. The tube may also be a process tube situated within a surrounding heating coil.

When a temperature gradient exists between the furnace and its surroundings, all devices that are in direct contact with the furnace surface will lead thermal energy away from the furnace to the colder surroundings. This energy drain takes place from the point at which the device concerned is in contact with the furnace surface and is more effective the better the device conducts heat and the larger the contact surface is between said device and the furnace.

Examples of such devices include supports for holding the furnace in place, different measuring devices and current outlets for supplying current to the furnace surface or leading current away from said surface. These devices are often made of metal and are therefore good heat conductors. When the device in question is a current input device, large electrical contact surfaces are often required due to the strong current required to heat the furnace to the desired temperature.

Typical working conditions for a given type of electrically heated tube-like furnace include temperatures of from 500-1200°C inclusive. At these temperatures, a typical highest acceptable deviation from the predetermined temperature distribution in the furnace is 10-20°C. When heating material for single crystal growth by diffusion, the temperature range may be 500-1400°C with an accuracy of +/- 0.1°C. The electric currents required to achieve such working temperatures are so strong as to require the use of relatively powerful current input devices.

Other types of furnaces may be heated in ways other than by supplying electrical energy to the furnace casing. Furthermore, different devices that do not normally conduct current may be applied to the furnace casing and thereby cause the punctiform flow of thermal energy from the heated furnace volume.

Accordingly, the present invention relates to a method of transmitting electric current to a furnace which is heated, either totally or partially, by current transported in the furnace wall, where electric current is transmitted through devices lying against or connected to the furnace wall, and is characterised in that at least one of said devices has close to the furnace wall a section whose cross-sectional area is smaller than the remaining part of the device in question, and in that the electric current passing through said smaller cross-sectional area causes in said region of smaller cross-sectional area the development of heat that corresponds substantially or totally to the heat transport that would have taken place from the furnace wall to the device in the absence of said smaller cross-sectional area.

The invention also relates to an arrangement of the kind having the general features set forth in Claim 8. The invention will now be described in more detail partly in connection with the embodiments of the invention shown in the accompanying drawings, in which Fig. 1 is a general view of a preferred embodiment of the present invention; Figs. 2-6 are cross-sectional views of different examples of preferred embodiments of electrically conductive devices according to the present invention; and Fig. 7 is a cross-sectional view showing in more detail an example of a preferred embodiment of a current input device according to the present invention.

Fig. 1 is a side view of a so-called tube-like furnace according to one embodiment of the present invention, with dimensions being given in millimetres. The furnace is of the so-called continuous conveyor furnace type and has the form of a long open cylinder, a so-called annealing tube, whose barrel surface 1 constitutes the furnace casing operative in the process. The casing consists of an electrically conductive material preferably a metal or a metal alloy. Products, such as wire, for instance, are annealed in such furnaces.

The invention can as well be applied with a tube-like furnace for batch-wise heating of products, in which case the ends of the tube are closed during product heating operations. Furnaces of this nature may be used, for instance, in the manufacture of electronic circuits.

NiCr is a typical metal alloy used in furnace manufacture. However, this metal alloy splatters at high temperatures, due to material oxidation. This splattering influences the mass distribution of the furnace casing and therewith its electrical resistance. In turn, this makes control of the furnace temperature difficult to achieve as a result of the strength of the current applied. For this reason, FeCrAl is a preferred material in respect of tube-like furnaces according to the present invention since this material does not splatter.

A number of electric current devices 2-6 are connected to the furnace casing, of which certain terminals 2-4 are current input devices and the remaining terminals 5, 6 are current drainage or current discharge devices. Electric current is caused to flow into the furnace casing 1 through the current input devices 2-4 and to leave the tube-like furnace through the current drainage devices 5, 6, by applying an electric voltage across the current input devices 2-4 and the current drainage devices 5, 6. Because of the power developed in the furnace casing 1, the current will heat the enclosed furnace volume as a result of the electrical resistance in the casing 1.

The voltage across each pair of current input devices and current drainage devices can be adjusted individually, so as to enable the current therebetween to be controlled. This enables the object of being able to control heating of the enclosed furnace volume to be achieved, so that the magnitude of the heating effect will be different at different places along the longitudinal axis 9 of the furnace.

Thus, the furnace power supply, and therewith its temperature distribution, can be controlled in a very precise manner by appropriate placement of the current input devices 2-4 and current drainage devices 5, 6 and the application of an appropriate voltage thereacross, as will be understood by the person skilled in this art. The volume whose temperature it is desired to control in the tube-like furnace of Fig. 1 may be that part of the enclosed furnace volume situated between the current input device 2 and a respective current input device 4 or 5 and the current input device 3 and devices 3 and 6 respectively.

One problem with this construction is that heat is dissipated from the furnace casing 1 through the current input devices, since said devices are in direct contact with the furnace casing. This heat dissipation contributes in the disturbance of the predefined temperature distribution desired with regard to the enclosed furnace volume.

With the intention of balancing this heat loss, the current input devices 2-4 placed in the vicinity of the region of the enclosed furnace volume whose temperature shall be controlled are provided with a waist 10-12. In other words, there is provided on each such current input device 2-4 a region 10-12 whose cross-sectional area is much smaller than the cross-sectional area of the remainder of said current input device. As a result of the smaller cross-sectional area of the waist 10-12, the electrical resistance offered to the current through the devices 2-4 is greater in the waists 10-12 than in the remaining parts of respective devices 2-4. As current flows through the input devices 2-4, power is developed as a result of the electrical resistance of said devices and by the current that flows through the devices 2-4. This power development contributes to a heat surplus in each current input device 2-4, thereby causing the furnace casing 1 to be heated punctiformly at the contact surface between the input device 2-4 and the casing 1. By adjusting the cross sectional area of the waste 10-12 the person skilled in this art will be able to balance this input of energy to the furnace casing 1 against the energy losses resulting from heat dissipation through the current input devices 2-4 and thereby achieve a zero net flow of thermal energy from the furnace to the surroundings through said input devices 2-4. This net contribution to heating of the enclosed furnace volume will therefore not influence the temperature distribution in the furnace. The waist is located close to the barrel surface of the tube so as to reduce the size of the surface of the input device located between waist and tube, this surface being cooled by the surroundings.

Instead of providing the current input device with a waist, the current density can be increased by removing material from the central part of said device, for instance by providing a hole therein.

5 The tube-like furnace can be held in a desired position with the aid of different types of supports (not shown in the figure). These supports lie in direct contact with the barrel surface of the furnace and therewith contribute to the drainage of thermal energy from the furnace surface 1 to the surroundings through the support surfaces in contact with the furnace housing 1, in much the same way as do the current input devices, resulting in a
10 temperature imbalance in the heated furnace volume.

Similar to the electric current input devices 2-4, the supports can be made of an electrically conductive material and a voltage can be applied across the supports so as to cause current to flow therethrough, wherewith the applied current through the resistance effect will
15 contribute to the flow of heat into the furnace housing 1 through the cross sectional area of the supply. The net heat flow can be brought to zero, by regulating the applied voltage and by adjusting the cross-sectional area of the support. In a preferred embodiment, the electrical resistance of the support is influenced by providing the support in the proximity of its contact surface with the tubular casing 1 with a waist that has a smaller cross-
20 sectional area than the remainder of the support. This waist contributes towards increasing the resistance of the support and thereby the subsequent flow of heat into the tubular housing. The supports and the current input devices may, of course, be integrated with one another.

25 The energy balance in the furnace will also be disturbed by other heat conducting elements that are in direct contact with the surface of the tube-like furnace. An electric current can be passed through all such devices, wherewith said current can be brought into thermal energy equilibrium with the furnace surface 1 in combination with appropriately chosen dimensions of said devices or said waists. Two such devices are referenced 7, 8 in the
30 figure.

Figs. 2-6 illustrate five different embodiments of electrically conductive 2-6 according to the present invention, with dimensions being given in millimetres. As will be seen, the dimensions of the current input devices 2-6 are by no means small in relation to the

diameter of the tube. It is necessary for the cross-sectional area of the devices 2-6 to have at least a given order of magnitude because of the strength of the heating current. Because the contact surface between the current input devices and the tube are of a substantial magnitude, the loss of heat through the input devices is far from negligible.

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The geometrical shape of the contact surfaces of the current input devices 2-6 can be chosen selectively to suit the remaining conditions of the embodiment, provided that the geometrical shape is of an order of magnitude that enables the present objects to be achieved.

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The waists 10-12 on the current input devices 2-4 placed in the close proximity of the temperature-controlled part of the enclosed furnace volume 1 can be clearly seen from the figures.

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Fig. 7 is a more detailed side view of an electric current input device 2 according to the invention. This figure shows the study of the vertical energy balance through a horizontal plane at the level of the waist 10 of said device 2. Heat lost from the furnace to the surroundings through said current input device is illustrated by the arrow 14. Electric current flowing through the waist of the current input device results in a balancing flow of heat into the tubular casing. This compensating heat flow is illustrated by the arrow 15. The net heat contribution of the energy flows illustrated by arrows 14, 15 can be controlled to zero by choosing a waist 10 cross-sectional area of suitable magnitude in relation to the operating temperature in the furnace casing 1 and to the current strength in the operation of the furnace.

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Although the invention has been described above with reference to a number of exemplifying embodiments, it will be understood that the design of the current input devices, the number of said devices and the number of current drainage devices can be varied, as can also the design of said waists.

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The present invention shall not therefore be considered to be restricted to the described embodiments, since variations can be made within the scope of the accompanying Claims.